# LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

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Scripture
Isaiah 11:6-9
Matthew 18:1-5

**"... and a little child shall lead them."**
**-Isaiah 11:6(RSV)**

Back when we were having babies I always wanted to announce the pregnancy from the pulpit, but was constrained by another, more reasonable voice in the house which convinced me that it really wouldn't be appropriate, so I never did.

But, I have observed over the years that grandparents are granted permission to do many things they would not have thought of doing with their own children and I simply cannot ignore the extraordinary experience of presiding at the Baptism of Caitlin. I have also observed over the years that every grandparent says essentially the same things:

1) - Isn't this baby the most beautiful baby in history?

2) - This experience eclipses and magnifies my own parenting in ways I can't begin to understand or explain - and

3) - Here, let me show you some pictures.

Well, it's all true but instead of showing pictures I got to hold her up for all to see. Grandparents talk to one another knowingly about the marvelous new phenomenon, this grace, this completely undeserved blessing in whose light we now stand. I bumped into an old friend of mine last spring shortly after the news of our new status was announced. He is the head of a mining equipment company, a tough industrialist. He pulled me aside and said with a twinkle in his eye - "Contrary to what I've been telling you for ten years - there is one free lunch and this is it." And, of course, he was right; these babies bless us simply by showing up. Simply by happening they cause ordinary fathers and ordinary mothers to become "grand" fathers and "grand" mothers and they cause ordinary grandparents to become suddenly "great."

Babies change things simply by showing up. Actually, they have remarkable power. I was involved in a baptism two months ago which did not break any ecclesiastical rules, I trust, but surely gave them a good stretch. It involved three babies who were cousins: all born at about

the same time. The grandparents live in Chicago but their children, the parents of these babies, have all scattered and live elsewhere. "Why not bring them all home for baptism?" the grandparents thought. Trouble is that one set of parents remained Episcopalian, one were now Catholic and the third had become Presbyterians in Florida. Because Baptism is a Sacrament of the church for all of us and we take it seriously, we don't quite know what to do when invited to baptize ecumenically. It isn't easy for a Presbyterian to baptize apart from the context of the congregation.

Well, they kept at it and negotiated their way through a maze of ecclesiastical paraphernalia and finally it happened in an Episcopal Church. One hundred and fifty people were there, family and friends and the Episcopal Clergy, a Roman Catholic Priest and me. And it occurred to me in the middle of this remarkable little gathering (which really didn't fit theologically or ecclesiastically into anyone's tradition...) that these three babies had managed to do something which several centuries of adult activity - including bloody wars, high level negotiations, international organizations and twenty years of intense ecumenical relating - had failed to do yet. Namely, they had persuaded us to forget all about differences and get together around the love of God which is so eloquently present in the babies themselves and in this sacrament. And that thought hit me with such power during the little homily I was delivering that I barely got through it.

It reminded me of one of my favorite historical vignettes: the night the Civil War stopped because Confederate General George Pickett's wife had a baby.

"A little child shall lead them," the prophet Isaiah said in a gorgeous vision of a peaceable kingdom in which there is no more violence, no hurting and destroying. We read that passage in Advent: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse." The church hears in the ancient words of the prophet a promise fulfilled in the birth of the child of Bethlehem.

It must have been a part of that vision that Jesus had on his mind when one day he took a child in his arms and said to his disciples - "turn... become like children."

Don't you love the question the disciples have asked? "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" We can't resist asking that question. It is the quintessential adult question - "Who's the greatest? Who gets to go first? Who's number one?" It is such a serious, urgent, grown up question. And Jesus' response was to hold up a little one. I like to think it was an infant, a few months old, certainly too young to even have heard of the Kingdom of Heaven let alone be worried about how to get in it, and said - "Become like this."

It has always been tempting to sentimentalize these words of Jesus. They remind us, if we think about them, of a time that once was and is no more. They invite us to remember when the world was softer and sunnier and we were safe; when good prevailed and all the enemies were defeated. They remind us of the relentless movement of time and the loss of our youth and our mortality and before long we are feeling sorry for ourselves (Who wants

to go through adolescence again?). That is not what Jesus was about.

So what did he mean when he brought a child into that somber, adult setting? I like to think that Jesus knew intuitively what our best psychology is teaching us, namely that there is something basic to our humanity in children, and that becoming an adult should preserve, protect, enjoy and nurture the child we once were and in many ways still are.

There is a child in all of us, the psychologists say. A decade or so ago everyone was reading and talking about I'm OK - You're OK which said essentially that all of us are three persons: a Parent, an Adult and a Child. These three persons, or "personality states," exist in us regardless of our age, and in every life situation - we use one of the three. Sometimes our Parent is "on," other times it is our "Adult" doing the talking and sometimes we are "in" our "Child."

Dr. Thomas Harris, the author of I'm OK - You're OK, describes the Child in us:

"In the Child resides creativity, curiosity, the desire to explore and know, the urges to touch, feel and experience." [p. 27]

The Child in us wants to play. It is where our sexuality resides. It is where we can laugh and tease and rejoice and trust and be vulnerable.

And the fact is that something happens to that in nearly all of us. Harris said that as we mature, the Parent and Adult in us grow larger and stronger - and that is good. But then they crowd out the Child in us and that is not so good.

We do not respond freely and reach out in love, as the Child in us would do because the Parent in us says "be careful, don't risk getting hurt, don't make a fool of yourself, remember what other people will think."

We don't stop and smell the roses, as the Child in us wants to do because the Adult in us has to get to work on time. Slowly but surely, the ability to laugh spontaneously, to love freely, to weep openly - the Child in us - is reduced in stature and pushed into the corner of our psyche.

"Turn and become like children," Jesus said.

Philosopher Sam Keen, in a marvelous short story, "Education for Serendipity," recalls a miserable afternoon he spent in an elementary classroom that is so close to my own experience I know about it personally. The subject was "Penmanship," my own personal Waterloo. He was listening to Mrs. Jones' monotone: "make your i's come all the way up to the middle line. Make your o's nice and round. Circle, circle, circle. Period. Now repeat."

His despair was interrupted by a warbler building a nest outside the window. He watched and wondered and dreamed and was caught and stayed after school. He reflects: "Mrs. Jones won more than the day. Schooling became a habit for me and I remained in the classroom for twenty-five years

and five degrees without seriously questioning the maxim that private enthusiasm must be divorced from the educational task." [To A Dancing God, p. 38-39]

Something like that happens to all of us. We learn that getting the i's straight and the o's round is more important than the ability to respond with curiosity and joy and love to the beauty right outside the window.

And that is something of what Jesus had in mind when he, in response to the calculating, joyless, somber and very adult question - "Who will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" ... held up a baby and said - "become like children."

Let's not sentimentalize and romanticize. Children can be terrible. They can be messy, inconsiderate, unapologetically selfish and they cry a lot when they're hungry and wet. There is more than a little truth to the old saw that the best part of grandparenting comes in handing them back to their parents when all that stuff starts.

The childlikeness Jesus meant was not childishness. It was, I propose to you, the elemental grace that is simply a given in a child -

.the openness and responsiveness
.the wide-eyed wonder at mystery and discovery
.the curiosity
.the integrity which allows the child to say the most honest things...

A three year old guest at my table, when we bowed our heads and I began to pray the grace asked in a wonderfully penetrating voice - "What are you doing, man?"...

And one of my own, who when the Presbytery Executive was at our table and had bowed for grace - thus revealing a bald head to her for the first time - announced, "Daddy, that man has a hole in his head."

All of which was anticipated by Hans Christian Andersen's story of the Emperor's New Clothes in which all the adults are "oohing and ahing" and saying the conventional things until a child pipes up and points out "But he has nothing on."

Jesus meant the creativity that can make a game out of two clothes pins and a jar... and the ability to ask the awkward and often profound question... "Who made God?" which is, of course, "the" question, what the theologians call the basic ontological dilemma.

Bruno Betttleheim, in The Uses of Enchantment, proposes that children can handle "mythic truth" and don't need adult explanation of Jack and the Beanstalk or Little Red Riding Hood. It's Miami Vice and Dallas that we'd better exegete for them.

Children are not restricted by adult prejudices. We are not born bigots. We are taught that. Black and white children don't seem to notice

any difference until someone points it out. One of mine, when his new bicycle was stolen from our garage, and I was enraged at the violation of my property - said "Dad - the boy who took my bike must have wanted it pretty bad to do all that."

"A little child will lead them," Isaiah promised. "Become like that," Jesus said. My proposal this morning is that we listen to it for starters.

And when we listen to the children we will hear some of them crying for help. What keeps this topic from maudlin sentimentality is the reality of what being a child is like not very far from here. The ghastly counterpoint to our beautiful infants is that new born deposited in a garbage can in our city two weeks ago.

The motif of children which runs through the story of Jesus had a profound impact on Western civilization. Jesus was unique in suggesting that children were human beings, objects of God's love - and the Christian church challenged and then changed a mentality which regarded children as expendable. So this sermon would be irresponsible if it did not contain a suggestion that as a culture we are very much behaving as if our children are expendable.

The State of the Child, a remarkable document, is a thorough survey by the University of Chicago which makes for very sobering reading by reporting that "the condition of children in Illinois has worsened by every standard of measurement."

The state of children in Chicago includes dramatic increases in:

child abuse and neglect,
substance abuse,
school drop outs,
unemployment,
teen-age pregnancy,
crime, -

all played out against a Housing Authority that doesn't work. And now, irony of all, the one public effort which does work - public education - will not be available because of a strike.

An independent, private sector plan of action, responding to the grim findings of The State of the Child says, "If we do not care for our children, the cost of our failure will be prohibitive in human and financial terms. They will grow to adulthood too impaired to function as productive, independent men and women."

So we will continue to offer Tutoring at Fourth Presbyterian Church, not only because we hope for a better world - but in the name of Jesus. We will try to offer more in terms of values and family support. We will take some chances because people who know Jesus cannot read the statistics and drive west on Division Street without a very deep sense that all these children belong to all of us. And that if we don't redirect some public and private attention, and stop using poor and minority children as pawns in the tricky finances of partisan politics, we might as well save the money

we are so eager to spend on Star Wars defense schemes because there will be nothing much left here to defend.

Among the sounds we hear when we listen to the children will be a distinct and urgent cry for help. But perhaps the most edifying and touching and most profound characteristic of childlikeness is trust... God creates human beings with the innate ability to trust.

Those disciples of Jesus who asked, "Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" were being very serious and adult. They were trying very hard. They were men whose religion had taught them that the harder they tried, the more goodness they performed, the more rules they obeyed, the closer they would approach their salvation. And Jesus told them that they were missing the whole point. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a prize to be won but a gift to be received. And religion is not a list of rules to be obeyed but songs of gratitude to be sung, and joy to be expressed and laughter to be shared.

So we try hard - to be the best we can be, to hold up our end of the load, to live up to the expectations of others, to be responsible. We try hard to be givers and earners and accomplishers and succeeders. And for many of us the hardest thing in the world to do is to accept anything without earning it, working for it, winning it. We try hard at religion. Even our praying is adult work which we are constantly analyzing for beauty of prose and exactness and syntax. We try hard at relationships and for many of us the most difficult assignment in life is not to try harder, because we're good at that, but to stop trying - to simply belong enough to receive the love another has for us... to allow the love of another to flow down over our heads like the fresh water of heaven.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the incredible good news that God is love: that the maker of this universe is not an angry, judgmental tyrant, but a beloved parent. The Gospel is the incredible good news that the first cause, the ground of all being, the creative energy behind everything that is love... Those serious friends of Jesus missed that and so do we.

So on occasion God gives us a child; brings a child into our midst and says, "become like children." There is a child in you that knows about that. There is a child in you that once knew how to accept the warmth and caring and love of another. There is a child in you that remembers how to laugh and rejoice and be grateful. There is a child in you and in me that very much wants and needs the love of God. And is a child in you capable of trusting God for your salvation and quite capable of receiving it with joy and laughter.

Last Tuesday the staff of this church was engaged in its weekly meeting when it was blessed by a special interruption. We had been at it all morning, and because it was our first time all together after summer, we worked through lunch - planning our priorities for the fall. It was very Adult, sometimes ponderous, and by 2:30 p.m. we were tired, impatient and becoming irritable. It was my turn - at the end - to tell the others about my priorities.

Because it was late and the sitter had to leave, Geoffrey, son of Deborah and Tony, joined this solemn assembly. Geoffrey is two. The first thing he did was look at our empty plates and cups and say - "eat!" The second thing he did was refuse to stop saying "eat." The third thing he did was throw his pacifier across the table to Dave Donovan and the fourth thing he did was fly to the piano in a gale of laughter and enthusiastically have at it. Whereupon a meeting that was far too long and far too serious came to an end. With smiles and laughter and a sense of grace and a common, unspoken understanding that, in a way, the benediction had just been pronounced on each of us - we had been blessed by a child.

Listen to the children.

Better yet, turn - become like children.

We pray for the children, Lord God, bless them.

We pray for courage and compassion to love all your children.

We pray for the child in us, and we thank you. You who are father and mother to us - for that love which created us and sustains us and nurtures us all our days; that love which keeps us safe forever - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.